LEYSHON THOMAS 1814-1904

"Rails and Ales"

Leyshon Thomas was born in Neath, an industrial town in South Wales, and was christened on 19th June 1814 at St Thomas's church, Neath. His father, Simon Thomas, was a miner. Leyshon married a local girl, Elizabeth Hill, in 1835, and by 1841 was working as a moulder, making the moulds into which molten metal was poured to form castings.

The growth of the metalworking industry in the early nineteenth century was driven by a number of factors. The arrival of the steam engine had made industrial operations more efficient, as well as providing more effective transport of both raw materials and finished products. The invention of the blast furnace and of "puddling", the raking of iron in the furnace while molten, allowed iron to be cast using coal in furnaces rather than the more difficult to obtain charcoal. The South Wales coal was ideally suited to this new process, and it provided the basis for a flourishing industry. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Britain had relied on imports of iron from Sweden and Russia, where wood for charcoal was abundant. But by 1850, the South Wales industry was producing over half of the world's iron. Almost every rail of the United States railway system built in the next half century was produced in the South Wales valleys.

In 1792 three Quaker families had bought an industrial site on the banks of the river Clydach at Neath Abbey with the intention of producing pig iron for their foundries in Cornwall. They built large blast furnaces with air blown by a Bolton & Watt steam engine, the most powerful in Britain at the time. By 1818 the company was using moulds to produce machine parts and eventually complete steam engines. It became world famous, producing not only a wide variety of beam, pumping and marine engines, but also railway locomotives and, later, iron ships. Its products were exported all over the world. In 1829, under the watchful eye of George Stevenson, it produced the

track which the next year carried his locomotive "The Rocket" from Liverpool to Manchester at a world record speed of 36 miles per hour.

By 1861, Leyshon & Elizabeth Thomas were living at the Cupola Tavern, an inn in Briton Ferry, a small town adjacent to Neath, selling beer, although Leyshon also continued to work as a moulder. They had a total of ten children, of whom the second and third, John and Elizabeth, emigrated to New Zealand later in that year. Both were married with children, and they sailed together with their families. John later moved on to Australia.

The beer selling business in Briton Ferry did not go well. There were frequent fights at the tavern, and in 1862 Leyshon was sent to prison charged with bankruptcy. No creditors appeared at his hearing, however, and he was soon released.

By 1867 he had decided to start a new life in the United States. He sailed into New York as a steerage passenger from Liverpool aboard the SS City of London on October 21, 1867 with his wife and five youngest children, and was processed at Castle Garden. The family soon moved to Syracuse, NY, where they established a saloon. His son Jenkin joined the family in America later, having travelled from Northumberland with his new English wife.

Welsh emigration to the United States began in small sailing boats from the many little harbours around the Welsh coast, but by the middle of the nineteenth century, larger boats were sailing from Liverpool to the east coast, stopping at Queenstown, now Cobh, the port of Cork in Ireland to pick up Irish emigrants. Most Welsh towns had emigration agents who sold passages on these larger vessels, which reduced the crossing time from many weeks to less than a fortnight and made the passage considerably safer. As a result, more and more Welsh men and women sought their fortune in the New World, and in 1870 there were more than 75,000 Welsh-born people in the United States.

By 1875 the family was scattered around the North Eastern states. Several of Leyshon's sons had worked in the metal industry. Jenkin was still a puddler, but Richard and Leyshon junior had returned to the saloon business. Richard established the Thomas Restaurant and Saloon in Superior St, Cleveland, and in 1874 Leyshon junior bought a saloon on Broadway Street, also in Cleveland.

Saloons were once everywhere in America. Serving as boisterous poor man's clubs, they dominated social life for the labouring majority. By 1897 there were roughly a quarter of a million saloons, or 23 for every Starbucks franchise today.

Some were middle-class and respectable, with pianos and chandeliers; others were more down-to-earth, serving beer in tin cans. Women, not surprisingly, avoided the bar save for prostitutes and some very tough barmaids.

Although early Americans drank cider and rum, and later also whiskey, they eventually switched to low-alcohol German lager. Saloons became places for slow, social imbibing, blending immigrant and American cultures.

Saloons also provided drinkers with a free lunch: cheese, crackers and bologna, pigs' feet and pretzels, liverwurst and sardines, and plentiful raw onion. In a nation with no social safety net and chronic recessions, these snacks kept many labourers alive.

A year later Leyshon senior and Elizabeth moved to Cleveland and bought the Broadway Street saloon for $2750. Leyshon was then aged 60, although throughout his time in the United States, he had seriously understated his age. Elizabeth died in Cleveland in 1879.

Leyshon junior went on to establish the West End Hotel and Restaurant in Norristown PA, and seems to have been very successful. In 1902 he was President of the Firemen's Association of the State of Pennsylvania.

Richard's business also flourished, and on his death in 1895, his estate, which included his restaurant and

several other properties in Cleveland, was valued at in excess of $30,000.

Another of Leyshon’s sons, Reese, moved to Mississippi where he established a business as a levee and railroad contractor to the government, before buying and running a farm in Jasper, with his wife and children.

At some stage, probably after his wife's death in February 1879, Leyshon senior came back to Great Britain, and returned via Castle Garden, the New York immigration centre, to Cleveland. He appears there in the 1880 census, wrongly enumerated as Daniel Thomas.

On July 12th 1880, Leyshon senior remarried at the age of 66. His bride, Mary Jane “Jennie” Simmons, was born in Canada to an Irish father and a Canadian mother. She was just 24 years old on her marriage, 42 years her husband’s junior.

Four years later, on October 20th 1884, they became the proud parents of Jennie’s only child, and Leyshon’s eleventh, Gwendolyn Thomas.

Despite the huge age difference, Jennie and Leyshon’s marriage lasted almost 24 years until Leyshon’s death in 1904 of gastroenteritis at the age of 89. He was still mis-stating his age, but now in the other direction, and his death certificate shows him as 96. He is buried in Harvard Grove cemetery in Cleveland.

The monument marking Leyshon Thomas’ grave in Harvard Grove Cemetery, Cleveland, Ohio.

Jennie Thomas lived to the age of 85. She died in Cleveland in 1940 and is buried in Lake View Cemetery.

Gwendolyn married a German immigrant, Albert Burschkat, in Cleveland in about 1907. They quickly changed their name to Bushcott, and had two daughters, both of whom sadly died in infancy. Many years later they moved to Los Angeles, where Albert died in 1954 at the age of 70.

Gwendolyn Bushcott was still living 150 years after her father’s birth. She was half Welsh, a quarter Irish and a quarter Canadian, and was married to a German. Her father was born before the Battle of Trafalgar, when James Monroe, the fourth President, sat in the White House. Her grandfather, Simon Thomas, was born before the Constitution of the United States was adopted. She died in Los Angeles in 1965, aged 80.

Leyshon Thomas' eldest daughter Catherine, by his first wife Elizabeth, was Gwendolyn' half sister, although fifty years her senior. Unlike all of her eight surviving siblings, she did not emigrate but remained in Neath throughout her life. She was my mother's grandmother, and lived into

her nineties. My mother Edith died in 2006 just after her 90th birthday, which was attended by all of her descendants.

It is often said that life expectancy in the nineteenth century was short. That is indeed the case, but the improvement in more recent times has been caused not so much by older people living longer, but by younger people surviving childhood illnesses which would once have killed them, and in the case of women, surviving childbirth, in far greater numbers than before. Surprising numbers of people in those days survived into their eighties and nineties.

Edith remembered Catherine well and had some interesting memories of her. Each evening she was sent to the public house across the road in Henry Street Neath to buy a pint of beer for her grandmother. Catherine would hide it under her Welsh shawl if visitors arrived. Edith would also play American revivalist hymns, which were very popular in Wales at the time and later, for her grandmother on the piano. Edith requested that her favourite, *'Jesus Only'*, written by Harriet M. Conrey of New York City in 1878, be sung at her funeral.

Roger Davies
November 2008, revised January 2020

Leyshon Thomas 1814-1904
m 1 Elizabeth Hill 1810-1879
Catherine 1835-1927
John 1837-1899
Elizabeth 1839-1904
Jenkin 1841-1902
Mary 1843-1922
Rees 1845-1846
Rees 'Reese' 1847-1923
Leyshon 1849-1931
Richard 1854-1895
Margaret 'Maggie' 1861-?
m2 Jane Fitzsimmons 1855-1940
Gwendolyn 1884-1965